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ABSTRACT

After a long process of trial and error, a freshman composition course was developed on the basis of three assumptions. First, freshman English should be a course in expository writing rather than a literature course, since a great deal of time is required for students to master the complicated skills involved in effective exposition. Second, freshman English should help students develop the writing skills they will use later in life in cooperating with others to solve problems. Third, freshman English should be rhetoric oriented, focusing on organized practice in the use of specific writing processes. The freshman English course based on these assumptions has proved effective for students of all ability levels. (GW)

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WRITING TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

James D. Baker

The ideas which I am presenting for your consideration today might be given the sub-title "Assumptions Based upon a Ten-Year Search for a Course." In 1967, I was concerned about the complaints of students who resented being required to take an English course which they considered a waste of time. I did not accept their implied assumption that they needed no more training in English. But I did see that if my course was to provide any permanent benefits for these anti-English students, I would have to make it more relevant and meaningful to them.

The more I evaluated my course, the more I realized that it needed improvement. So the search was on. I experimented with various approaches. I tried combining composition with a study of essays on current issues. Later I used Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action as a basic part of the course. Then I tried a different approach with general semantics. Next, I experimented with combining a study of communication processes and practice in expository writing. Now after a long process of trial and error, I have settled for a course based upon three assumptions. First, Freshman English One should be a course in expository writing. Second, it should be designed to help students develop the skills which adults need when they cooperate with others to find answers to questions and solutions for problems. Third, the writing should be rhetoric oriented in order to focus attention upon the specific skills required for this type of communication.

Early in the search, I became convinced that Freshman English One should be a composition course. Student criticism caused me to question the validity of my traditional literature course which gave only secondary emphasis to composition. It seemed to me that we college English teachers were ignoring the criticisms leveled at us from all sides because many of our students were not able to write. We were closing our eyes to evidence of our failures shown when large numbers of upper level college students could not write papers or handle essay type examinations. We were denying our partial responsibility for the fact that many graduate students could not write dissertations, that a large number of engineers, business men, and professionals could not produce effective reports or proposals for projects. We were turning our backs upon the world outside of Academe and continuing to do "our own thing."

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in its report Reform on Campus made a recommendation that has value for English teachers. The Commission's study convinced them that too much attention is given to having students learn pre-selected content in subject fields. These specialists believed that our major responsibility is to show students how to confront large bodies of knowledge, how to handle large issues. This guideline indicates that English teachers should, first of all, help students learn how to analyze data, how to communicate about their knowledge. In short, how to develop their writing skills.

Too many college English teachers live in glass towers, but they constantly throw stones. Most of us criticize high school teachers because they do not teach our students how to write (and thus make our job easier). Yet many of us continue their error of giving major attention to literature and neglecting composition. But there is one major difference in the two actions. High school teachers' full class schedules and very heavy student loads make it physically impossible for them to give the needed practice in writing. Our failure to concentrate upon composition is a matter of choice. We do have the time. Yet we prefer to follow

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the easier program of teaching literature which we enjoy more.

My recommendation that we place emphasis upon composition is not a denial of the value of the study of literature. It is only a shift of priorities. I am merely suggesting that we should first concentrate upon developing the basic writing skills which the student will need to apply in all areas of expository writing. Then the skills can be used in analyzing and evaluating literature.

As I explained earlier, I experimented with various programs for combining some content with practice in developing composition skills. But none of them worked. Writing effective exposition requires a number of complicated skills. If students are to master these, both they and the instructor must give considerable time to the task. The forty-five class hours of a semester simply do not allow time for other work. Even though I believed that the content which I wanted to add was important, I was forced to establish a priority and settle for a program devoted entirely to composition.

Fortunately an increasing number of English instructors are becoming aware of the need for more emphasis upon composition and are accepting the challenge the situation presents. This awareness is reflected by the number of summer seminars on methods for teaching composition, which are being offered in different parts of the country.

There is another encouraging new sign. The University of California has taken a significant stand that may do much to support the campaign for developing writing skills. Starting this summer, the University will give English credit for only courses that "have substantial, recurrent practice in writing expository compositions of some length." This new policy means that the University will no longer accept journalism, speech, or drama courses to meet the English requirements for admission. The University is also considering adding a fourth year of English to its requirements for admission and is planning to expand the San Francisco Bay Area Writing Project to provide training for English teachers.

Now let us consider for a moment my second assumption. My search convinced me that Freshman English should be planned to help students develop the writing skills which adults need when they cooperate with others to find answers to questions and solutions for problems.

From the beginning of my experiments, I was convinced that my first task was to demonstrate to the students the relevancy of the course. I needed to help them understand that we were concerned with the development of skills which they would use for the next fifty years. I started by showing them the tremendous amounts of accurate communications involved in the operation of a complex society like ours. Then we considered the exact types of writing they might need to do. An analysis of the writings of scientists, of business, professional, and citizen groups showed that they were all concerned with the same basic processes. They collected and analyzed facts. They compared and contrasted things, situations, processes, and proposals. They explained the causes of conditions which they wished to change. They gave careful attention to persuading their readers to accept their proposals and conclusions. The writing in all these areas dealt, in one way or another, with problem-solving.

In the late 1960's, I was concerned with helping students develop into competent producers in some area of our complex society. In the early 1970's, the

publication of Alvin Tofler's Future Shock and the writings of other futurists helped me to see a new dimension of my task. The evidence they presented jolted me into an awareness of the avalanches of change that are crashing down upon us from all sides. These thinkers gave me a more realistic perception of the world which our students must face.

One phase of the collosal task confronting them is reflected in the knowledge explosion that is occurring. In 1970 Dr. Robert Hilliard, a top educational specialist for the Federal Trade Commission, estimated that if knowledge continues to expand at the present rate, the knowledge of 1970 will quadruple by 1990 and will increase thirty-two times (3200%) by 2020. Dr. Hilliard's forecast is mind boggling. We may disagree about the power and exact extent of the explosion, but we cannot deny the direction in which we are moving. New knowledge affects our entire intellectual environment and changes our lives. To appreciate this point, we need only look at the evidence of the countless ways in which the computer has changed the work we do, the ways we think, the approaches we take to problems. If one machine can change our lives in such profound ways, what will be the effects of hundreds or thousands of new processes?

Try to imagine the complicated questions that will come with this new knowledge. Should scientists be allowed to create human beings in laboratories? Should they be permitted to experiment with changing man's basic genetic structure and to produce new kinds of men? Who would decide what kinds of men would be created in this new world? What would be the effects of using chemical and mechanical means for altering the ways our brains and nervous systems respond? Who would decide what persons would receive the benefits of the miraculous, but extremely expensive, new medical cures? Should we create huge satelites upon which men would live in outer space? In this increasingly mechanized world, what safeguards could be established to preserve and nurture the qualities and values which make us superior human beings? The questions will be endless and they will increase at exponential rates.

There is nothing we can do to change the fact that the present generation of students must face and adjust to the most complicated, explosive, and far-reaching changes mankind has ever known. But we can prepare them to cope with this world. We can help them develop communication skills that will enable them to analyze and direct these changes.

Emphasizing writing skills is beneficial for another reason. The process brings an important by-product. As students develop into careful writers, they also become discriminating readers and listeners. A good basketball player can evaluate the performance of other players. He knows when they are not playing well. In the same way, a person who has trained himself to concentrate upon answering a specific question knows when a speaker or writer evades or wanders from the question. Once he has learned to check himself to be sure that he has provided full factual evidence to support his judgments and inferences, he will turn off the writer or speaker who tries to influence him with unsupported assertions or illogical reasoning.

This corollery benefit is of major importance in a society where people are constantly deluged with a Niagra of messages which they must weigh and evaluate. It produces a basis for hope in a democracy which requires intelligent citizens who can analyze complicated problems and evaluate conflicting proposals to

determine their probable effects. These skills are essential if citizens are to use their influence to support the choices which will lead to viable solutions for the new situations that will arise.

My third assumption, that this composition course should be rhetoric-oriented, may be as controversial as the first two. But it seems to me that my judgment is supported by the basic fact that here we are concerned with developing skills. Mastery of skills does not come from the mere repetition of some activity. The problem is the same whether one is concerned with learning to type, to play the piano, or to play basketball. Mastery comes from the planned, organized repetition of specific aspects of particular skills. And in this process, the learner needs to concentrate upon exact techniques and to strive consciously to repeat indicated patterns of activity.

A championship swimming team is not developed by having the athletes swim for a given time each day. The coach requires the team to go through hours of practice perfecting certain techniques as they stroke, kick, breathe, or make precision turns. No more do students become competent writers of exposition by merely writing a given number of papers in a course. The crucial question is whether or not this practice increases their competency in handling specific writing processes. They need to master techniques just as the swimmers do.

At one stage in my search for a better course, I decided that since I was experimenting with content, I should also test a different approach to handling compositions. I, therefore, dropped my usual strong emphasis upon rhetoric and experimented with having the students write papers that developed some idea sparked by their reading of controversial essays. I dropped the experiment at the end of the semester. This "express yourself" approach produced some interesting papers, but it did not improve the students' skills as expository writers. It seems to me that this free-wheeling type of assignment encouraged a student's tendence to accept his careless thinking, his illogical and incoherent proof. I also felt that I slipped in meeting my responsibilities as an editor. With such vague assignments, I found that I was prone to accept as satisfactory a student's rambling comments about some point. Too often, I ignored the fact that the student did not stick to his thesis or topic sentence, or, even worse, did not have either. I had a tendency to grade such papers for the fluency of expression and the absence of errors. Frequently I failed to judge them as they would have been evaluated in the world of work. Here they would have been rated with an "F" because they lacked a well-constructed skeleton of content that provided a logical development of specific ideas.

Our task as English teachers is as exact as that of the swimming coach. If we are to meet this responsibility, must we not explain clearly the specific techniques involved in executing a particular process? Should we not provide writing assignments that require the student to practice given rhetorical processes? Should we not accept only papers that demonstrate a satisfactory application of these techniques?

My experience convinces me that asking students to write types of papers provides better training than do vague "express yourself" assignments. When a student is writing a paper that requires him to apply a particular rhetorical process, he is forced to give more attention to the process. If he is asked to write a cause/effect paper, for example, he is encouraged to think about the specific

problems involved in the thought process. And he is more apt to apply the specific suggestions the instructor has given him to help him handle this kind of development. Especially if he knows that his failure to apply the techniques will affect his grade. Vague assignments tend to allow a student to approach the writing as an exercise in recording his stream-of-consciousness responses to some broad topic.

My work with my Freshman English One course based upon these assumptions leads me to believe that they are valid. I have used the approach with good, average, and weak students; and the emphasis seems to have helped them all to improve their expository writing. Furthermore, the approach provides motivation. Students become more willing to work hard when they see the practical value of the skills being developed. The approach also helps the students to understand the high standard of achievement which I set for them, even if they do not like it. They resent strict grading when they perceive it as a reflection of the whims of a pedantic English teacher. But they are more willing to accept it when I show them that I am only applying the exacting standard of the world of work. There is a third advantage that the approach meets the ever-increasing public demands for accountability. Students who pass my course can write. Most important of all, this approach helps students develop the skills with which they can understand and direct the chaotically complicated, changing world that lies ahead of them.

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